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ABSTRACT

The formation, development, and demise of a women's center in suburban New York are described. The women's center resulted from a conference designed to assess problems confronting women and to mobilize resources to meet those problems. However, after the formation of the center, a struggle for leadership and conflicts over the values and beliefs of the participants emerged. Many of the middle-class women with children at home tended to be more moderate and emphasized education, counseling, and referral to existing facilities rather than social action and radical change. As the emphasis shifted from social action to service, the center's reason for existence became eroded. The leaders became immobilized and quarreled among themselves, and the ambivalences among the leaders reflected the role strain prevalent among most women today. Women feared appearing too militant to attract other women or too ineffectual to accomplish the improvements they desired in the status of women. In addition to internal factors accounting for the Center's demise, external problems were prevalent, such as inability to tap funds. Recommendations for future women's centers are included. (Author/DE)

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DEVELOPMENT AND DEMISE OF A WOMEN'S CENTER

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DEVELOPMENT AND DEMISE OF A WOMEN'S CENTER

Most social movements arise as the result of structural strains in the existing social system. Widespread discontent and some degree of awareness of common dissatisfactions are prerequisites for strains emerging in the form of a social movement, rather than a loose collectivity. But not until common ideas and goals are agreed upon, a program developed, and a structure established, does an ideology become a social movement. (CRM Books, 1973).

Strain within the system, however, is not sufficient to assure the probability of new social movements arising. Relative deprivation, and the revolution of rising expectations contribute to the fact that the most disadvantaged groups are the least likely to launch a social movement. Only after a group has been led to expect somewhat improved conditions are they likely to react to deprivation with organization and strength.

This paper is a case study designed to provide in-depth understanding of the patterns of interaction that resulted in response to the social forces prevalent in a particular geographical area, and to suggest wider application to an assessment of whether the women's movement is becoming institutionalized locally. The study is a participant observation of the formation, development and demise of a women's center over a two year period.

Once a social movement arises, it cannot exist indefinitely without undergoing significant processes of change.

The likelihood of particular consequences occurring are also altered as shifts occur in membership, leadership, shared goals, norms, values, and degree of external resistance to the movement. In the case of the women's liberation movement, one of the manifestations of the changing social process has become the formation of "women's centers" in various areas of the country.

Among the consequences possible for any social movement are: (1) to become respectable and institutionalized; (2) to fail to attract a substantial following and gradually dissolve; (3) to lose power and adherents but continue a restricted existence; (4) to be successful in its program and modify society's values; or (5) to be coopted and dissolved as a movement, yet have effected institutionalized change in the social structure. This paper will trace the consequences of the attempt to effect institutional change through a women's center.

The Setting

Bryan County is an affluent, populous county in the metropolitan New York area, one in which the education and income levels of women significantly exceed the national average. Women comprise more than half the population, 51.8%, yet have little impact on the social structure in an organized way, and are absent from influential, decision-making positions in the county. Only 2.5% of the population is black, and 1.5% are black women.

In assessing the presence of prerequisites for the institutionalization of the women's movement through women's centers, the following local factors are noted.

The widespread sources of discontent among women in this county were assumed to be prevalent by a group of women professionals, who came together in the Spring, 1971. They represented a wide cross-section of organizations, including universities, state employment service, planned parenthood, housing agencies, agencies for the aging, welfare institutions, and welfare rights organizations. The mass media had been communicating the strains existing in the national fabric over sex discrimination in employment, graduate education, academia, literature, and the political system. Since communication of perceived strains can foster or retard the progress of a social movement, it is noteworthy that this area is saturated with mass media, including newspapers, magazines, radio and television. Awareness of common dissatisfactions had become widely perceived among the circles in which these professional women travelled. They believed the time was ripe to launch concerted social action.

The county in which these professionals operate has long been a stronghold of conservative government, with low responsiveness to social needs. Inasmuch as the response of the established government affects the direction of a social movement, this factor was crucial to the women's definition of the problem. As professionals, these women had discovered dissatisfaction with stereotyped sex roles and began attributing it to inadequacies in the social structure, rather than to individual incapacities. Involved in law, medicine, social work, education and administration of health and welfare programs, these women were becoming sensitized

to the inequalities perceived in the courtroom, in prisons, in doctors' offices, in classrooms and public life -- regardless of class or status. Consciousness-raising groups were formed in the county; a chapter of the National Organization for Women took hold and gained strength; a branch of the National Women's Political Caucus struggled to emerge; university women began offering specialized courses in the history and sociology of women; and agency leaders were perceiving more discrimination against women on welfare, particularly those from minority groups.

Thus, the climate was fertile for attempting to institutionalize the women's movement locally with a more permanent structure.

Organizing for Collective Action

For several months, a small planning group attempted to define the social problems to which they could address their priorities. After floundering in several directions, a noted woman sociologist accepted the task of chairing an all-day action conference on the Needs of Women. From that juncture on, the group focussed on implementing the conference.

University women, sophisticated in understanding politics, organization and social action, were mobilized to serve on each of ten task forces charged with gathering data, selecting speakers, planning sessions and carrying out the general purpose of the conference. Over 55 women's organizations sent representatives to work together during the summer of 1971, to plan the conference scheduled for the fall. Many of these women already knew the problems facing women in the

county, since they were leaders of volunteer and professional groups. A few black and Spanish-speaking women represented welfare, housing, and community groups. Top-notch women in their field were recruited to handle a spot assignment, such as publicity for the conference. A good cross-section of women's interests and social classes existed at this stage.

The Needs of Women Conference was to be action-oriented. In advance publicity, the conference chairwoman stated, "We know the problems...Our goal at the conference is to discuss resources available to meet those problems." (Record, 1971).

The ten topical workshops organized for the conference were:

(1) employment opportunities
(2) training resources for future employment
(3) child care services
(4) women and the law
(5) volunteer programs
(6) family planning and health services
(7) women's center
(8) economics and home management
(9) women and higher education
(10) housing rights and resources

After exploring the conditions facing women in each of the categories, participants were to assess available resources, and gaps in services. Each group was to present specific recommendations with concrete steps to be taken and strategies to be employed. The hidden agenda of the conference leaders, however, was to support the concept of the women's center.

Impact of the Conference

At the conference, in which over 300 women participated, the work of almost one hundred women involved in planning and carrying out the details came to fruition. A number

of minority group and lower-income women were present, but most were white, middle-class suburban women. The difficulties of channelling information to the black and Spanish-speaking communities, plus the national image of the women's movement as predominantly middle-class, were presumed to be the cause of such poor participation from minority women. Those that were there made a special contribution to the workshops. Women on welfare spoke and were particularly enlightening to the well-insulated housewives who rarely encountered the poor as peers.

On the whole, the conference was well-managed and reflected credit on the women in the county. Many participants had "come prepared to hate a thing called 'women's lib' and left surprised and grateful for a constructive program." (Record, 1971). However, the social action orientation was diluted and the leadership was successful in channelling the workshop recommendations into support for the formation of a women's center.

The manifest objective of the center was to implement the conference goals and strategies and to serve the special needs of women in the county. But the latent consequence of the Women's Center was to abrogate the social action goals of the conference by the women themselves assuming the burden of providing services. No governmental agents were called upon to dedicate resources to this purpose. Women volunteered to organize a task force to carry forward the workshops' goals through a structure, a means of funding, and a location for the proposed center.

The institutionalizing of the county women's movement came into being on the crest of a wave of solidarity generated by the conference. It had achieved respectability and had attracted a substantial following; it had received good press coverage, opening the channels of communication to a wider potential membership.

Shifts in Leadership

In the transitional phase, from conference to task force, most initial leaders disappeared, apparently willing to turn the next stage over to newcomers and leaders who had emerged during the conference. The few blacks and Spanish-speaking women also did not re-appear, nor did any sustained concern for their problems. The previously professional-dominated group became infused with community women, largely without organizational experience, although enthusiastic and committed, but intent on minimizing the university influence.

Many new leaders expected the type of shared, non-hierarchical leadership reputed by the women's movement to be superior to traditional, male-dominated structures. They immediately collided with the experienced, dynamic academic leaders who were primarily task-oriented and eager to capitalize on the momentum generated by the conference and move ahead with funding and program proposals.

Value Conflicts

Added to the struggle for leadership in the early months of the formation of the Women's Center, were the emerging conflicts over values and beliefs. One dimension that evoked conflict was that of affiliation with and possible

funding from a community mental health center, using federal funds for "consultation and education." Some members feared cooptation and were determined to avoid the image of women visiting the Women's Center as synonymous with being in need of therapy. Others merely saw the affiliation as an expeditious alliance to gain space and support.*

Another value conflict emerged as the recruitment progressed of more middle-class women with children at home. Their values tended to be more moderate, away from social action and radical change, toward education, counselling and referral to existing facilities. They favored workshops geared to educating women, such as "Women and the Law," "Women Power Is Dollar Power," and "Female Sexuality," which each attracted audiences of between 30 and 60. Even a Political Action and Education Institute scheduled prior to the 1972 Presidential election became more education-oriented than action-oriented, in response to the members who attended.

Service projects, such as attempting to establish a "feminary" as a short-term refuge for women in acute need of housing, replaced more action-oriented plans including lobbying and promoting women into key positions. The tendency to become a traditional women's group was very strong.

Conflicting Norms

At each stage of the emerging structure of the center, conflicts arose over desirable norms. In drafting the con-

*After months of internal wrangling, the request for space was finally made to the mental health center - and refused. The proposed use of the building by the Women's Center did not coincide with that intended by the Board of Directors of the mental health center.

stitution and by-laws, for example, a heated issue developed over whether men should be permitted to join the Women's Center. At one end of the spectrum, members were concerned that men not be permitted to dominate the organization. Others were more concerned that women must show men the way to liberation, through inclusion, not exclusion. The issue required two meetings to resolve, the second meeting reversing an original decision to include men.

A similar conflict over norms occurred regarding male speakers on panels, and the same plea of "human liberation" was invoked. Again, the issue was resolved in favor of women speakers only, in order to develop and provide a platform for competent women in various fields.

These strains caused rifts within the organization, even while the community at large was becoming aware of the presence of the Women's Center. For many months, it was nip-and-tuck between the struggle to maintain the center, the need for which was manifested by the hundreds of calls from women in distress, and the inability to erect a stable structure without ongoing financial support. Members' dues were the only source of regular funds, although there was increasing pressure for additional contributions.

After writing several proposals, directed to private foundations, none of which were accepted, and requesting revenue-sharing funds slated for the county, members became discouraged with the prospects of gaining public funds, and turned to conventional women's fund-raising techniques. Garage sales, concerts, art shows, women's theatre, were not sufficient to provide the resources necessary to survive.

The more traditional the tempo and tenor of the center became, the closer it came to dissolution. As the emphasis shifted from social action to service, the Center's raison d'etre became eroded. The leadership became immobilized and quarrelled among themselves, in typical response to powerlessness. Unable to attract a substantial following and without solid financial support, the Women's Center atrophied.

Internal and External Factors

The primary factor leading to the development of the Women's Center had been the awareness of common dissatisfactions among a group of professional women. Initially, the leaders demonstrated an ability to develop a substantial following, which encouraged them to follow through on the perceived impact of the women's movement nationally and attempt to institutionalize a Women's Center.

Despite many indications that it was fulfilling a deficiency in resources available to meet the needs of women in Bryan County, the Women's Center did not survive. The key factors accounting for its demise were internal and external. In the social climate of 1971-73, public funding for innovative structures addressed to social problems was starved. In assessing the extent to which the problems which proved insurmountable were structural, the following factors were considered. The inability to tap funds for even a modest beginning was disheartening. In this wealthy county, public social services were notoriously under-financed and not change-oriented. Revenue-sharing had not materialized as a vehicle for local priorities arrived at through citizen participation, which might have afforded facilities such as the Women's Center access to the decision-making arena.

Without a sponsor, such as a University, willing to supply professional staff, space and auxiliary services,* the efforts of a small group of women struggling "to become respectable and institutionalized" had little chance of success. (Supra, p. 2). To expect a voluntary agency to exert sufficient pressure to generate institutional change without resources is unrealistic.

The Nixon administration stressed a return to vol--untarism, and the middle-class women leading the Women's Center were caught in this traditionalism. It affected their ability to mount social action programs and forced them to be self-reliant. Internal conflict ensued over tailoring programs that would be manageable and appeal to a broad constituency of potential supporters. These conflicts produced a paralysis borne of uncertainty over the best utilization of their meager resources. Their predominant appeal to middle-class women robbed them of the diversity and ingenuity that might have derived from involvement of minority and lower-income women.

Summary

The ambivalences apparent among the leaders of the Women's Center reflect the role strain prevalent among most American women today. They are in a transitional state, recognizing the necessity to become free of male-domination, as evidenced by the Women's Center's exclusion of men from potential positions of control of the organization, yet choosing to avoid the label of "women's libbers" by presenting a

*One successful Women's Center in a neighboring county has such support.

moderate program. Largely inexperienced in organizing and effecting social change, and devoid of any seats of power in the county, Bryan County women floundered on the dilemmas of social action vs. service and independence vs. cooptation. They feared appearing too militant to attract other women, or too ineffectual to accomplish the improvements in the status of women they desired. They blinded themselves to the extent of their allegiance to the status quo.

The women who believed that forming the Bryan County Women's Center was the best vehicle for introducing feminist goals into the institutions of the county ultimately were "blaming the victim." It is difficult to expect the most disadvantaged--those who have been discriminated against in law, housing, education and employment--to garner the resources necessary to eliminate the barriers raised against them. Thus far, pluralistic ignorance keeps them from risking whatever status they have attained in the struggle for liberation. But, if the expectations of the women of the county continue to rise, and the responsiveness of the government does not increase, they may be driven to more radical positions.

Individually, the leaders of the Women's Center retained their commitment to the women's movement, despite the demise of the center. The University women redirected their energies toward forming a campus-based women's caucus. Other professional women formed new counselling enterprises, having seen a ready market for such services. Some returned to other feminist groups. Still others became more active poli-

tically, determined to involve women more effectively in the power structure.

The most probable outcome, among those outlined at the outset, is that of cooptation of committed individuals within traditional societal structures, which in turn become altered by the new participants. In this way, the Women's Center has begun to effect institutional change.

Recommendations

For the future, women leaders would be well-advised to tap the emerging black feminist consciousness more firmly, in order to broaden the constituency beyond middle-class values, norms and perspectives. In addition, they must recognize the difficulties involved in retaining an emphasis on social action and commit the sustained energy required to succeed. Finally, in order to institutionalize the women's movement, feminists must become more political, in the sense of addressing their demands to public officials, expecting public resources to redress the inequities, and entering the political arena themselves. Only by improving their political status, will the social and economic gains they seek materialize.

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